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Metaphors of the Virgin in Byzantine Literature and Art

The following paper is concerned with the repetition of metaphors in Byzantine art, with a focus on images that evoked the Virgin. As is well known, in the fifth and sixth centuries, Byzantine homilists and poets created a rich repertoire of metaphorical images to describe the Virgin, many of which were derived from the natural world. These metaphors were reiterated in sermons and hymns until the end of Byzantium. Many of the same images also accompanied the Virgin in her portrayals in Byzantine art, but much less frequently than they appeared in literature, and not at all periods. This disjunction between constantly repeated verbal and written metaphors, on the one hand, and sporadically appearing visual imagery on the other, is the topic that will be explored here. I will attempt to suggest some of the motivations that led artists to successively reject, then to a limited extent accept, and then again reject many of the nature-derived metaphors provided by the literature of their church.

By way of preamble, it may be helpful to attempt some basic distinctions between the concepts of symbol, metaphor, and fetish as they apply to the visual arts. If we take animals as our theme, we could say that the elephant and the donkey are currently symbols of the Republican and Democratic parties, but not metaphors, because these animals are not intended to be descriptions of the two parties – the Republicans are not considered to be inherently elephant like, and the democrats are not inherently donkey like – except perhaps in the eyes of a few opponents. On the other hand, if a modern American politician were to accuse his opponent of being a chicken, that could be considered a metaphor, because he would be implying that his rival shared some chicken-like characteristics, such as cowardice, or indecision. Finally, the American eagle could be described as a fetish, of a kind. To the eagle, especially in association with the flag, some Americans pay due honor and respect, even if they do not worship it. In this paper I shall be concerned primarily with the last two categories, that is, with metaphors and fetishes, and the degree to which the two could be confused.

In the first half of the fifth century we begin to find the Virgin addressed in Byzantine literature through a rich repertoire of images. In broad terms, these metaphors may be classicized as cosmic, terrestrial, aquatic, nautical, architectural, horticultural, and animal. Thus, in the fifth sermon of Hesychius of Jerusalem, the Virgin becomes the mother of light and the star of life, the rain bearing cloud, the field that produces the fruit, the mine from which was cut the stone that covers the whole earth, the enclosed source of the river, the case for the pearl, the ark wider than the one built by Noah, the vessel full of cargo, the temple greater than the sky, the closed door of Paradise, the enclosed garden fertile without seed, the untouched vine well hung with grapes, and finally the turtle dove and the dove.¹ Richer still is the list of metaphors contained in the chairetismoi of the Akathistos hymn.² Suffice it to say that here, also, most of the metaphors fall into the same broad categories, that is, cosmic (the star and the dawn), terrestrial (the promised land, the source of milk and honey, the unsown field, the sweet field, the rock), aquatic (the ocean, the river of many streams, the rock giving water), nautical (the boat, the ark, the harbor), architectural (the wall, the mansion, the strong tower, the pillar, the heavenly ladder, the bridge, the gate, and the key), horticultural (the spiritual paradise, the tree of brilliant fruit, the branch of fair-shading leaves, the vine of abundance, the flower of incorruption), and animal (the filler of the nets of fishermen, the fold of the flock).³ Such streams of metaphors, many

¹ Homilia V, 1–3 (ed. M. AUBINEAU, *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem I* [*Subsidia hagiographica* 59]. Brussels 1978, 158–64).

² On the date, see L.M. PELTOMAA, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*. Leiden 2001, 114.

³ PELTOMAA, *Akathistos* 1–20.

drawn from nature, expressed the belief that the created world had been sanctified through the incarnation, and, in the words of Anastasius of Antioch, “changed into a wealth of beauty.”⁴

In the sixth century, we begin to find some of the same images from nature that had evoked the Virgin in hymns and sermons also accompanying her portrayals in works of art. This phenomenon occurs both in the public and the private sphere. Among public monuments, the best examples are the mosaic apses at Kiti, in Cyprus, and Poreč in Istria. At Kiti, we find the Virgin and Child framed by a rich border portraying six fountains, represented by vases, three on each side of the apse (fig. 1).⁵ The topmost vases are flanked by pairs of stags, the ones in the middle by parrots, and those at the bottom by ducks. A similar nature-derived imagery accompanies the Virgin on an object from the domestic sphere, a late sixth or early seventh-century bracelet now in the British Museum. Here the Virgin is portrayed with her hands raised in prayer on the bezel, while the hoop displays a vase flanked by pairs of swans and other birds.⁶

In the apse of the mid-sixth century cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč we find a different set of images depicted beneath its central portrayal of the Virgin and Child, namely a set of nine large scallop shells executed in golden mosaics, separated by fourteen discs of actual mother of pearl (fig. 2).⁷ Besides Hesychius of Jerusalem, whom I have already cited,⁸ Proclus also used the metaphor of the Virgin as the shining shell that contained the pearl of truth.⁹

Of course, shells, animals, and vases also appeared in other contexts in early Byzantine art. But the literary metaphors addressed to the Virgin were well known by the middle of the sixth century; anyone who looked at the same motifs depicted in association with the Virgin in works of art must surely have been reminded of their reiteration in hymns and sermons. These motifs are not so much imitations as evocations of Byzantine literature.

I turn now to the middle Byzantine period, between the end of iconoclasm and 1204, when the stream of metaphors continued to flow unabated in church literature. To take only one example, in a sermon on the Annunciation by Leo VI, we find the Virgin described as the rock from which gushed the fountain of life, as a fruitful paradise, and as a lily.¹⁰ Some writers of this epoch, taking their inspiration from the much admired sermon on the New Sunday by Gregory of Nazianzus,¹¹ used a formal ekphrasis of the season of spring in order to convey the sanctification of creation through the incarnation on the feast of the Annunciation. Thus, in the tenth century, John Geometres described the gentle streams, the land covered with flowers, the trees with leaves, and the birds, fishes, and terrestrial animals bringing forth their young, all seeming to celebrate the renewal of our nature.¹² Other writers, such as the Cypriot Saint Neophytos at the end of the twelfth century, repeated the traditional chairetismoi in their sermons on the Annunciation: the fruitful unsown field, the great and spacious sea, the spring irrigating paradise, the tower, the ladder, the gate and the door, the vine and the tree of life, the turtle dove, the swallow, the nightingale, and so forth.¹³

⁴ In Annuntiationem (PG 89, 1384D).

⁵ D. MICHAELIDES, *Cypriot Mosaics*. Nicosia 1992, 119–21, figs. 70a–b.

⁶ D. BUCKTON (ed.), *Byzantium. Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture*. Exhibition catalogue (British Museum). London 1994, 95–6, no. 99.

⁷ A. TERRY – H. MAGUIRE, *Dynamic Splendor: the Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*, II. University Park 2007, figs. 140–53.

⁸ Homilia V, 1 (158, 11–12 AUBINEAU); Homilia V, 3 (164, 20 AUBINEAU).

⁹ In sanctissimae Deiparae Annuntiationem 4 (PG 85, 436A). For the citation and the attribution to Proclus, see N.P. CONSTAS, *Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos and the Loom of the Flesh*. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3,2 (1995) 169–94, esp. 177, n. 27. On the image of mother of pearl, see N.P. CONSTAS, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations*. Leiden 2003, 290–94.

¹⁰ In Annuntiationem (Leonis VI Sapientis imperatoris byzantini homiliae quas ed. Th. ANTONOPOULOU [CCSG 63]. Turnhout 2008, 7–9 [= PG 107, 24D–25B]).

¹¹ Oratio XLIV, In novam Dominicam (PG 36, 608–21).

¹² In Annuntiationem (PG 106, 841B–D).

¹³ Ed. M. TORNILOLO, *Omellie e catechesi mariane inedite di Neofito il Recluso (1134–1220c.)*. *Marianum* 36 (1974) 184–315, esp. 242–4, 262.

The situation in the visual arts was somewhat different. The horticultural metaphors were evoked in abundance, and inanimate objects, such as mountains, towers, ladders and gates were sometimes shown. Animals, however, appeared much more rarely in association with the Virgin. For an example of floral imagery, we may take the splendid enameled revetments from an icon of the Virgin, dating to the late eleventh or early twelfth century, and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 3).¹⁴ Here both the Virgin's halo and the background are filled with highly stylized, but brilliantly colored flowers, the ones in the halo possibly evoking lilies. For architectural metaphors, we can look to the elaborate structure that rises to the left of the Virgin in the late twelfth century fresco of the Annunciation at Lagoudera on Cyprus, where we find the images of the tower, of the gate, of the door with its key hole, and of the ladder (fig. 4).¹⁵

The most famous of the icons that associate the Virgin with animals is the late twelfth-century panel of the Annunciation at Mount Sinai where we find a kind of riverscape depicted at her feet, complete with water birds of different kinds and a variety of sea creatures, including a sword fish and an octopus.¹⁶ This riverbank, with its creatures and its cliff-like edge, is a motif derived from late antique art, such as appeared in the dome mosaics of Santa Costanza in Rome.¹⁷ Behind the Virgin, her house is provided with an elevated garden, in which birds can be seen perching in the trees; two more birds are shown nesting on the roof of the building. The fame of this icon has obscured its rarity. Occasionally in other twelfth-century Byzantine Annunciation scenes we find the trees with the birds,¹⁸ but the variety of animal life shown on the icon at Sinai is unique.

Another unusual image in praise of the Virgin can be found in the twelfth century copies of the homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos. In James's homily on the Visitation, there is a passage describing how Creation venerated the Virgin as she rested on her way to greet her cousin, Elizabeth. The text reads, in part: "For behold, all Creation advances to meet her (the Virgin) when she is half way through her journey, and greets her with words of thanksgiving. Earth, as if taking pride in her own offspring, all but cries out as follows: 'Behold, my most blooming root, behold the fruit of my abundance... the fruition of my bounty and of the blessing by which I will be released from my sentence of thorns.... The rod that gives birth to the flower of incorruption.... Oh sweetest smelling lily of my fields... you are the pure stream from which, like drops of rain, the raindrops of the graces are sprinkling,'" and much more in the same vein.¹⁹ To illustrate this florid passage, the illuminator of the manuscript in the Vatican portrayed the Virgin sitting in a kind of forest of stylized plants and trees, with a stream flowing at her feet. On the left, the earth, depicted as a naked woman, raises her hands in adoration towards the Virgin.²⁰

As an illustration of the sanctification of nature through the Virgin, this remarkable image is, to my knowledge, unparalleled in medieval Byzantine art. Its closest visual antecedents are the celebrations of nature on the mosaic floors of Early Byzantine churches, which sometimes depicted nature personifications with bare breasts.²¹

In summary, medieval Byzantine writers continued to employ the wealth of imagery that had been used to describe the Virgin in pre-iconoclastic literature. In art, however, the situation was different. While artists continued to depict flowers and architectural elements in association with the Virgin, they were reluctant to

¹⁴ H.C. EVANS – W.D. WIXOM (ed.), *The Glory of Byzantium, Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261*. Exhibition catalogue (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*). New York 1997, 348–9, no. 236.

¹⁵ A. NICOLAIDÈS, *L'Église de la Panagia Arakiotissa à Lagoudera, Chypre: étude iconographique des fresques de 1192*. *DOP* 50 (1996) 70, n. 607; D. WINFIELD – J. WINFIELD, *The Church of the Panaghia tou Arakos at Lagoudera, Cyprus (DOS XXXVII)*. Washington, D.C. 2003, 142–3, fig. 76.

¹⁶ EVANS – WIXOM, *Glory* 374–5, no. 246.

¹⁷ H. MAGUIRE, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*. Princeton 1981, 50–52, figs. 42–3.

¹⁸ MAGUIRE, *Art and Eloquence* 48–9, figs. 38–9.

¹⁹ *Oratio in SS. Deiparae Visitationem (PG 127, 676C–677B)*.

²⁰ Vatican Library, MS. Gr. 1162, fol. 147; I. HUTTER – P. CANART, *Das Marienhomiliar des Mönchs Jakobos von Kokkinobaphos, Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1162 (Codices e Vaticanis selecti 79)*. Zurich 1991.

²¹ See, for example, the personification of "Thalassa" in the center of the nave of the Church of the Apostles in Madaba, dated 578–9; M. PICCIRILLO, *Madaba, le chiese e i mosaici*. Milan 1989, 96–107.

portray animals. The few exceptions, come mostly from the twelfth century, and can be considered the exceptions that proved the rule.

What were the reasons for this selectiveness on the part of post-iconoclastic artists? A primary motivation should be sought in the debates over iconoclasm of the eighth century, especially as expressed in the acts of the council of Nicaea in 787. The proponents of images were eager to distinguish themselves from the idolatry of the pagans, who, it was claimed had worshiped images of animals, including beasts such as bulls, as well as birds, reptiles, and even insects.²² Cleverly, the iconodules managed to accuse the iconoclasts of putting representations of birds and beasts into their churches, while they themselves, the iconodules, had cleansed their own places of worship of such images, portraying there only the anthropomorphic icons of the saints. Stephen the Deacon, the author of the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, claimed that Constantine V decorated the church of the Theotokos at the Blachernai with “all kinds of birds and beasts, and certain swirls of ivy-leaves [enclosing] cranes, crows, and peacocks, thus making the church, if I may say so, altogether unadorned.”²³ Thus the proponents of images exonerated themselves of the charge that they “worshiped the creature rather than the creator,” while they turned it back onto their opponents.²⁴ As John of Damascus expressed it, in the eighth century: “Is it not far more worthy to adorn all the walls of the Lord’s house with the forms and images of the saints rather than with beasts and trees?”²⁵ The Patriarch Nikephoros, at the beginning of the ninth century, accused the iconoclasts of tolerating images of beasts in their churches, while they destroyed the icons of Christ. It is true that Nikephoros also says that animal images appeared on the textiles that adorned the sanctuaries of the orthodox, but he claimed that these were there not for veneration but only on account of the beauty of the silks into which they had been woven. He does not admit that the portrayals of animals had any metaphorical role.²⁶ A similar sentiment was echoed in the eleventh century by Niketas Stethatos, who referred to animal images in churches as mere ornament and as “a source of delight.”²⁷ The fact that depictions of animals seem to have been avoided in the context of icons of the Virgin suggests that they had not entirely lost their negative associations with pagan idolatry. Only in the twelfth century do we find some loosening of the taboos, as exemplified by the icon of the Annunciation at Sinai.

In the period between the fall of Constantinople to the Latins in 1204 and the final fall of the city to the Turks in 1453, we find a similar disjunction between Byzantine literature and art. In the hymns and sermons the same metaphors addressed to the Virgin were repeated. Thus in a thirteenth century poem by Theodore Laskaris, she appears as a star, a bright light, the fount of the perennial stream, the sweet-smelling meadow, the flower, and the swallow, welcome harbinger of spring.²⁸ In a fourteenth-century sermon on the Annunciation by Isidore of Thessalonica we find another ekphrasis of the spring, with all of the usual images, including the flocks skipping and leaping in the fields, and the nestlings spreading their wings.²⁹ Once again, these embellishments contrast with the relative restraint displayed by artists. The experiments of the late twelfth-century icon of the Annunciation from Sinai and of the miniatures in the *Homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos* had no successors in the period after the Latin conquest. Although portrayals of the Annunciation to St. Anne did show her in the setting of a garden, as was required by the text of the *Protoevangelium*,³⁰

²² G.D. MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, XIII. (Reprint) Graz 1960, 286.

²³ M.-F. AUZÉPY, *La Vie d’Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre*. Aldershot 1997, 126–7, 221–2. Translation in C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453*. Englewood Cliffs 1972, 153.

²⁴ MANSI XIII 286.

²⁵ *De imaginibus oratio I* (B. KOTTER, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, III [*Patristische Texte und Studien* 17]. Berlin – New York 1975, 96, 10–12 [= *PG* 94, 1252A]).

²⁶ *Antirrheticus III* (*PG* 100, 465A). On this passage, see A. GRABAR, *L’iconoclasme Byzantin*. Paris 1984, 197–9; S. GERO, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V*. Louvain 1977, 116, n. 17.

²⁷ *Life of Symeon the New Theologian*, 93 (ed. I. HAUSHERR – G. HORN, *Un grand mystique byzantin: vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien* [949–1022] par Nicéas Stéthatos [*OCA* 12]. Rome, 1928, 128).

²⁸ S. EUSTRATIADIS, *Theotokarion*, I. Chennevières-sur-Marne 1931, 39–42.

²⁹ *Sermo III*, In *Annuntiationem* (*PG* 139, 112D–113C).

³⁰ See, for example, the mosaic in the Kariye Camii in Constantinople; P.A. UNDERWOOD, *The Kariye Djami*, II. London 1967, fig. 85. The Kariye Camii mosaics also portray pairs of birds underneath the scenes of the Caressing of the Virgin (peacocks) and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple (pheasants); *ibid.*, figs. 90–91.

scenes of the Annunciation to the Virgin were more restrained. Even in the richly decorated mosaics of the Kariye Cami, the metaphorical imagery of the Annunciation at the Well is confined to a discreet tree which rises from behind a wall in the background.³¹

The most striking examples of artistic poverty in face of the luxuriant nature-derived metaphors of the texts come in the cycles of the Akathistos, which was frequently illustrated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³² Here, the rich animal and even horticultural imagery of the poem is for the most part ignored. In the first, or “historical”, part of the hymn, the artists usually illustrated the underlying Gospel episode for each stanza, following the traditional iconography for each scene. In the second, or “theological” part, they showed groups of people, or angels, venerating the Virgin or Christ. For the most part, these illustrations are rigorously anthropomorphic, with very little attention paid to the nature imagery of the poem. For example, stanza 4 reads: “Then the power of the All-highest overshadowed her, planning the conception of one without experience of marriage; and she showed forth her fruitful womb as a sweet field for all who would harvest salvation...” Several of the cycles, such as the paintings in the church of St. Demetrius at Marko, illustrate these words by showing the Virgin seated on a throne with two maidens behind her holding a large veil (fig. 5).³³ Thus the metaphor in the text, which evokes the fecundity of nature, is replaced by the inorganic image of the veil. Only one of the metaphors in the stanzas of the Akathistos consistently receives a direct illustration in the visual cycles, and this also is inorganic. Stanza 21 begins: “we see the holy virgin as a lamp full of light, shining to those in darkness.” Accordingly, in the fresco at Marko, and elsewhere, she is portrayed with a column of flame rising from her head.³⁴ In sum, the experiments of the twelfth century, which flirted with the idea of celebrating nature in icons of the Virgin, were not continued.

The reasons behind this new retreat into a more strictly anthropocentric art were complex, but I suspect that one contributing factor was the need for a tighter self-definition by the Greek church after the Latin conquest of 1204. Ever since the iconoclastic period, Western artists had been incorporating nature-derived imagery into their churches, eventually to a much greater extent than the Byzantines. Often the motifs from nature were prominently displayed at focal points, such as the apses of churches, and frequently in direct imitation of early Christian models. Rome provides two prominent examples. First, we have the twelfth-century apse mosaic of San Clemente, with its central image of the Crucifixion surrounded by a luxuriant scrolling plant inhabited by a variety of flowers, birds including peacocks and pheasants, beasts such as stags, reptiles, and even insects, together with winged putti riding on dolphins.³⁵ Secondly, there is the thirteenth-century apse of Santa Maria Maggiore with its mosaic executed by Giacomo Torriti, where we see the Coronation of the Virgin, flanked by a plant scroll containing different birds, and taking place above a river reminiscent of the one beneath the Annunciation icon at Mount Sinai.³⁶ In both the icon and the Roman mosaic we find the jagged bank and a variety of creatures including fish, and waterfowl. One can see how such Western apses could have inspired the complaints found in the twelfth and thirteenth century lists of the errors of the Latins. Their Greek authors accused the Latins of not depicting the images of saints, but only the Crucifixion.³⁷ In the eyes of an orthodox Byzantine, such as Stephen the Deacon, the swirling plant scrolls

³¹ UNDERWOOD, Kariye Djami 146–7, no. 98.

³² I. SPATHARAKIS, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin*. Leiden 2005, esp. 5 on the supposed relationship between the twelfth-century icon of the Annunciation at Mount Sinai and the Akathistos.

³³ SPATHARAKIS, Akathistos 131, fig. 115.

³⁴ SPATHARAKIS, Akathistos 150, fig. 131.

³⁵ M. ANDALORO – S. ROMANO, *L'immagine nell'abside*, in: *Arte e iconografia a Roma da Costantino a Cola di Rienzo* (ed. M. ANDALORO – S. ROMANO). Milan 2000, 93–132, esp. 108–10, fig. 60, with earlier bibliography.

³⁶ ANDALORO – ROMANO, *L'immagine* 120–24, figs. 70, 72. Among earlier Roman works exhibiting a wealth of nature-derived imagery may be noted, especially, the ninth century mosaics of S. Prassede, commissioned by Paschal I (817–824); see W. OAKESHOTT, *The Mosaics of Rome from the Third to the Fourteenth Century*. London 1967, 210.

³⁷ J. DARROUZÈS, *Le mémoire de Constantin Stilbès contre les Latins*. *REB* 21 (1963) 72; *Opusculum contra Francos* 8 (ed. J. HERGENROTHER, *Monumenta graeca ad Photium eiusque historiam pertinentia*. Regensburg 1869, 65). On these texts see T.M. KOLBABA, *The Byzantine Lists: Errors of the Latins*. Urbana 2000.

enclosing birds would have left the apses “altogether unadorned.”³⁸ From the Byzantine perspective, these Roman apses, with their celebration of the created world, would have been sorely deficient as icons.

In this brief paper, I have only been able to suggest the barest outline of a picture that is, in fact, much more nuanced. However, I hope that at least the overall conclusion is valid, namely that the deployments of visual metaphors and of verbal metaphors were bound by very different rules in Byzantium. This was only to be expected in a society that placed the legitimacy of the visual image in Christian worship under such a high degree of scrutiny.

³⁸ See note 23, above.